

2-14-1977

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Recommended Citation

Jelly, Frederick M. (1977) "Mary and the Renewel of Catechetics in Our Time," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 28, Article 5, Pages 10-21.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol28/iss1/5

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MARY AND THE RENEWAL OF CATECHETICS IN OUR TIME

Presidential Address

By

VERY REV. FREDERICK M. JELLY, O.P.

After glancing back over the years at the presidential addresses of my predecessors, I have come to a few conclusions about my topic on the relationship between Mary and renewing the catechetical mission of the Church today. And they require some explanation. For the first time a president of our society is addressing this primarily pastoral problem. My decision in the matter was prompted mainly by the fact that the renewal of catechetics in our time is the theme for the next International Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome during October, 1977. It is my role to suggest to you some of the ways in which our theological reflections upon Mary can be of service to the Bishops in preparing for their Synod. I am convinced that our Society can make an important contribution in such an undertaking. Certainly it is not that, generally speaking, we are called to become experts in catechetics. Our membership, however, must be prepared to clarify the mariological dimension of all specific missions in the Church. In this address I propose to offer some speculative reflections and their practical implications with reference to the mariological dimension of renewing catechetics in our time.

At the same time, I should like to follow a pattern that is discernible in previous presidential addresses. In the context of my topic, I hope to help set the tone for this year's convention program which is by design interdisciplinary, representing bib-

lical, historical and systematic theology (both dogmatic and ethical); and, this is the kind of theological approach necessary for the renewal of catechetics. Also, most of the papers to be given at this twenty-eighth annual convention of the MSA have to do with one or another aspect of the hermeneutical question in Mariology,—the problem of how marian dogmas have developed from the biblical revelation and patristic witness. A viable theological theory of development in our faith about Mary is necessary for any convincing interpretation of her place in the Church today. And so I intend to make some general remarks about the current state of marian doctrine and devotion with reference to its relevance for the renewal of catechetics. Finally, since there is always plenty of room for improvement, I should like to offer a few proposals for the future, particularly as they would help make our Society more effective in the service of the Church.

The reasons why the theme of studying and renewing catechetics in our time has been chosen for the next International Synod of Bishops are manifold and meaningful. It is considered to be of dynamic concern for the Church's life and also calculated to have an impact upon all of modern society. In the booklet prepared for the use of the episcopal conferences we read that the purpose of the next synod is "to reflect on catechetics, with a view to a useful exchange of information and experiences, and for a united commitment to renewal."¹ The theme is at once rooted in tradition and required to meet the needs of today. From the beginning of her existence, the Church has been constantly concerned with guiding the faithful toward complete maturity in Christ as well as with the preaching of the Good News and the awakening of faith

¹ *Synod of Bishops: CATECHETICS IN OUR TIME WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CATECHETICS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE*. (For the use of the Episcopal conferences—THEME FOR 1977 INTERNATIONAL SYNOD OF BISHOPS, United States Catholic Conference: Washington, D.C., 1976). The references are indicated in the text of this presidential address as (CIOT, p...).

Christians are born to a new life that calls for continual nourishment by the Word of God. "It is this constant and ever more attentive listening to the Word of God in the Church which sustains believers in the daily situations of life and fits them for the exercise of faith, of charity and of hope" (*CIOT*, p. 1). I believe it important to point out the implied assumption here; namely, that our Christian faith develops not only in the hostile atmosphere of combatting heresy, but even more in the serene climate of the human quest for understanding to mature in any aspect of life. As grace completes nature and does not inhibit it, so the gift of faith in no way replaces reason but introduces the human intelligence into a realm of truth which it seeks to understand without comprehending the mystery. Catechetics, therefore, has been a basic part of the Church's teaching mission from her birth and doubtless played no small role in the development of a scientific theology.

From tradition itself we learn that the work of catechizing always had to be adapted to the historical and cultural setting of the faithful. The next synod of bishops is approaching this problem on a global scale and in a world of "future shock" which has been experiencing a radical and rapid cultural revolution. They must address themselves to several considerations, such as, discerning the signs of the times in light of God's Word, considering the contributions and risks to catechetics from the diverse cultures, discussing the special serious difficulties in lands where religious liberty is outlawed or rendered impossible by reason of subhuman conditions, and examining the successes and failures of the many experiments going on in the various countries (*CIOT*, p. 2). The synod will concentrate on the rising generation, children and young people, not because catechetics is for their benefit alone, but in order to bring the entire Church to a deeper sense of her responsibilities with a greater clarity. "Not just the bishops, not just the priests, not just men and women religious, not just certain lay people of goodwill, but the whole Christian

community—visible particularly in the local Church—is called upon, with various charisms, various ministries and various responsibilities, to be a credible witness to the risen Lord" (*CIOT*, p. 7).

The theme of the forthcoming synod is viewed as in continuity with the 1974 Synod which examined the "Evangelization of the Modern World" since catechetical activity constitutes a more specific ecclesial commitment (*CIOT*, pp. 2-3). The basic difference between the two synods is best expressed by St. Paul's distinction between planting and watering (cf. *I Cor.* 3:6-10). Evangelization sows the seeds of faith, and catechetics cultivates its growth toward full flowering in the life of Christ. The time is really ripe to renew this mission of the Church because of the tremendous ferment in catechetics since Vatican II. Those who are serving to lay the groundwork for the next synod, however, do not see the problems involved as purely ecclesiastical, but as a part of the problem perplexing the whole world,—that of education. In every sphere of the educational enterprise, teachers and administrators are experiencing the apparent conflicts between the inadequacies of traditional methods and the insecurities of new patterns. In their search for ways of resolving the tensions between the old and tried methods and the new patterns of education untested by time, the members of the synod will be particularly attentive to "the living experiences of the catechizing Church" (*CIOT*, p. 4). They will seek renewed means in this ministry of the Word by relating catechetics to other dimensions of the Church's life, to the faith-experience, to the mission of Christians in a non-Christian world. How can the Christian message become a motive and criterion for evaluating life both for believers in a secularized society and for the attraction of those who do not yet believe?

In studying the relationship between catechetics and contemporary cultures, many questions arise: what are the advantages and obstacles in the cultural situation of our country

for the catechetical ministry?; how is catechetics coping with the problem of ecumenism and dialogue with non-Christians?; what are the cultural influences from other countries that may be affecting the American Church's mission of catechizing?; what are the successes and failures or questionable results of experimentation in renewing catechetics to date?; what is the relationship between our Christian doctrinal heritage and human progress—with its connected queries about the relationship between catechetics and political commitment or that between theology and the human sciences?; how does catechetics in our country promote true liberty for all?; what are schools, including our seminaries and Catholic colleges and universities, doing to aid the family and parish in the renewal of catechetics today?; how are we utilizing the magnificent means of communication in our society to carry out our catechetical mission?; and, what kind of catechetical method is best calculated to bridge the gap between Christian doctrine and the many other aspects in the life of a believer today, particularly in the setting of a secular culture? Even to begin addressing such complex questions in our time calls for careful and continual collaboration on the part of the whole Church (*CIOT*, pp. 12-20).

How are we, as members of the MSA, being challenged to collaborate in such a monumental task? I believe that our special contribution is in the context of the problems pertaining to the relationship between Christian revelation as a doctrine to be grasped intelligently and Christianity as a dynamic way of life with its existential commitment to follow Jesus Christ in the world of our time. A balanced and developed Mariology is designed to help direct and motivate the faithful to act upon their catechetical knowledge first in relation to the other aspects of the Church's life and then to their Christian witness incarnated in contemporary culture. Of this truth I am convinced for many reasons which will become manifest in the course of my address. They are all rooted essentially

in the reason given by Father Karl Rahner when he was asked about the decline of Marian devotion and which is referred to in the American Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Mary, *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith* (page 32, no. 85 of the USCC ed.). Rahner's reply was that "...the special temptation that affects Christians today, Catholics and Protestants alike, is the temptation to turn the central truths of the faith into abstractions, and abstractions have no need of mothers."² Mary is the mother of the Word Incarnate, not of an abstraction. And the Word of God begotten by the Father is, to quote Aquinas, "not any sort of word, but a Word that breathes forth love."³ It is that divine eternal Word who was conceived and born and brought up by this woman in time. In Jesus Christ God truly became one of us without in any manner really ceasing to be Himself. The humanity of God is in no way an abstraction. It is the Reality in whom we all have our Christian being. And over the ages Mary has been called upon by the Church to witness to the realism that has been traditionally canonized in Chalcedonian Christology. Whether the deviation expressed itself in the abstractionism that is docetist or monophysite, or in the abstractionism that is adoptionist and nestorian, the truth about the mother always preserved the revealed truth about the Son. Cardinal Newman could say that the glories of Mary were always for His sake.⁴ Indeed the Theotokos defined at the Council of Ephesus is a Christological dogma. A true Mariology, therefore, will never permit us to reduce Christ and Christianity to a mere abstraction.

I have deliberately entitled this address "Mary and . . .," instead of "Mariology and . . .," precisely to emphasize the importance of concretizing our theological reflections upon

² Quoted by Leon Cardinal Suenens, *Mary and the World of Today*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, June 15, 1972

³ "...Filius autem est Verbum, non qualecumque, sed spirans Amorem. . ." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 43, a. 3, ad 2.

⁴ J. H. Newman, *The New Eve* (Westminster, Md., 1952) 67.

her role in salvation history. Of course this applies to all of our theologizing. Please note, however, that the problem is not with abstractions as such but with *abstractionism* which in theology becomes an ideology, namely, the confusion of our abstract concepts with the concrete realities of revelation. If this is a pernicious error in any real science, it is cancerous in the real science of theology since we thereby make our notions and logical constructs a substitute for the Word of God and so take the mysterious meaning and salvific power out of our divine faith. Even though unintentionally, we would be setting up our own creed and plan of salvation instead of keeping our theological interpretation rooted in the divinely "given" of revelation and the magisterial interpretation of the Church. Abstractions are good and even necessary in the real science of theology, since we cannot think about anything including our faith without them as a means of rendering the reality intelligible. They are a *means*, however, and *not an end* in any area of knowledge. Through and in our concepts we seek to contemplate reality. And we must continuously return to the reality whence our abstractions are originally derived. This is no more so among the sciences of the real than in the scientific wisdom that is theology. We should ever have recourse to the sources of our faith, in particular the inspired word of God within the living Tradition of the Church, if we are to encounter the real object of our faith, God Himself.⁸ With reference to Mariology, René Laurentin wisely observes:

It is very important that Marian theology should become more aware of the purely relative nature of its principles of systematization, of their limits, of their subordination to the sources, and of the transcendence of God's thought. Even if it is, of necessity, an exercise of the intelligence and rightly has a rational aspect, theology, nev-

⁸ "...in fide, si consideremus formalem rationem objecti, nihil est aliud quam veritas prima: non enim fides de qua loquimur assentit alicui nisi quia est a Deo revelatum..." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 1 c.

ertheless, cannot be detached from the order of analogy and mystery; it is inadequate by its very nature, and must, therefore, beware of the temptation to rationalism.⁶

In addition to the very nature of the theological enterprise itself, there are further reasons of fittingness why the theology of Mary should be free of any abstractionism and rationalism and ever in touch with its roots in revelation. One is that Mary is the woman of faith *par excellence*. Everything about her is a grace,—a revelation of God's mighty accomplishments in her spiritual odyssey. Another reason based on this one is that Mary is a fellow creature of ours raised up by God to reveal to us what His redeeming love can actually cause in the holiness of a human personality. She is truly our model and mother of the whole Church of Christ in the perfect redemption that Mary exemplifies. How fitting that our theological reflections upon this woman help ground a catechetics calculated to motivate and direct the People of God to live their faith!

The chief characteristics of contemporary marian doctrine, and the devotion springing therefrom and returning thereto for nourishment, all conspire toward this kind of renewed catechetical teaching in our time. It is *biblical* and *patristic* in remaining true to the unique norm of and early testimonies to our faith. It is *Christocentric* and *ecclesiotypical* in relating Mary dynamically to Christ and to us as members of His Body the Church. In accord with Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths,' the marian dogmas enlighten us both speculatively and practically about the meaning and value of the central mysteries in Christianity.⁷ Mariology is growing more profoundly *spiritual* and eminently *pastoral* in reference to our liturgical and private piety and to our apostolic endeavors. These charac-

⁶ René Laurentin, *Mary's Place in the Church* (London, 1965) 104; (cf. same work under U.S.A. title, *The Question of Mary* (New York, 1965)).

⁷ F. M. Jelly, *Marian Dogmas within Vatican II's Hierarchy of Truths*, in *Marian Studies*, 27 (1976) 17-40.

teristics are concretely exemplified in the three principal sources of more recent magisterial statements on Mary: 1) chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Church; 2) *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation for the "Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary"; 3) the American Bishops' Pastoral Letter, *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*, which has been reproduced in the Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia and has inspired other national hierarchies to write their own Pastoral Letters on Mary, such as in the Philippines. The works of many theologians also exemplify these characteristics, theologians both Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant. They are too numerous to name here and are more than adequately identified in Fr. Eamon Carroll's paper, *A Survey of Recent Mariology* which appears each year in *Marian Studies*.

Despite all the encouraging signs of a renewal in Mariology during recent years, we can ill afford to become complacent and run the risk of falling back into unacceptable habits of the past such as allowing our own abstractions priority over a clear examination and presentation of Mary in the living Tradition of our faith. One theme that is crying out for the proper attention and development is the special relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit. We mariologists ought to continue digging more deeply into the biblical theme of 'Daughter of Sion' and the patristic image of the 'New Eve.' The members of our Society should be in the vanguard of promoting the sort of Mariology that will assist the Church in each and all of her missions such as the renewal of her commitment to catechize, to foster growth of faith in all her children. There is no doubt from the *General Catechetical Directory* that "Mary, Mother of God, Mother and Model for the Church" is one of "the more outstanding elements of the Christian message."⁸

I should like to devote the remainder of my address to offer-

⁸ *Sacred Congregation for the Clergy: General Catechetical Directory* (U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1971) 54.

ing for your consideration some proposals of what we might try to do *as a Society* to collaborate more effectively with the Church in such a task as that of renewing her catechetical mission. I realize full well that many members of the MSA have been rendering their services with a great degree of generosity and acumen and, of course, this is a credit to our Society. But this is no longer enough,—if indeed it ever was,—to meet the demand for the contribution of scholarly research. The following proposals are designed mainly to suggest specific ways in which we might organize more efficiently for the purpose of being better servants.

My first proposal is that we form a Committee on Collaboration. I am not the first president of the Society to propose this in his address at the annual convention. Back in 1961 Fr. Walter Burghardt suggested it as part of his "Vision for a New Decade."⁹ He conceived of this committee as having a fourfold task: 1) to identify as clearly as possible the resources and specialties of our membership; 2) to provide a list of priorities in the untapped areas of research and the unresolved problems; 3) to organize the efforts of members and of others in collaboration toward solving these problems and examining primary or other significant sources; and, 4) to remind or, if necessary, "to hound" those who have committed themselves to a particular project. The number of members serving on this committee, its composition as including officers, etc., might all be worked out by the Board of Directors with good advice from the members at large.

My second proposal, which would or could be connected with the first, is to resurrect the MSA's practice of providing regional meetings. I am convinced that just an annual national convention does not reach even a small percentage of all who are interested in Mariology. Also convening at strategic times and places once again during the course of a year would give

⁹ Walter J. Burghardt, *Vision for a New Decade*, in *Marian Studies*, 12 (1961) 12.

the committee on collaboration an opportunity to perform its tasks more readily.

Thirdly, I should like to propose that we follow up on our questionnaire about the status of mariological courses and marian devotion in our seminaries as well as the quest for ideas regarding what might be done to improve the situation. This is not the time or place for me to make a lengthy report on the responses to this questionnaire. Suffice it to generalize now by saying that, as you might suspect, they were both 'good news' and 'bad news.' The 'good news' is that in many of our centers of forming future priests some basics are being taught; most often in the context of other courses in Scripture or Christology or Ecclesiology. The 'bad news' is that not enough is being communicated or even the fundamentals are done in a rush. My point now is that members of our Society most likely would be willing to become part of a team or series of teams in different parts of our country to help fill the mariological voids in our seminaries. Why couldn't the committee on collaboration make the organization of such teams one of its tasks? Again the specifics of this project are to be spelled out by further discussion, possibly when I give you the detailed report on the questionnaire later in this convention.

Following upon this third proposal, we should do well to consider reviving the seminarian's contest. Instead of asking individuals to compete with their fellow seminarians by submitting essays, I think it would be better to encourage groups of them to team up on a project that would be of mutual interest. In our time the emphasis should be placed upon topics concerning the spiritual and pastoral implications of Mariology. For instance, a report on the mariological dimension in the renewal of catechetics today would make an interesting topic.

Finally I should like to suggest a series of possible proposals for the purpose of brainstorming. Each one of these might well be incorporated into the functions of the collaboration commit-

tee. We ought to be developing some means of communication periodically with one another, e.g., a newsletter, circular letter, etc., and include other organizations who would be interested in the work of our MSA, such as diocesan marian commissions (e.g. Providence, R.I., Camden, N.J., Harrisburg, Pa., St. Louis, Mo.), mariological societies in other countries, etc. We ought to be extending the active membership of the MSA to include more laity, women as well as men. Surely Christian women should have something special to tell us from their theological reflections on Mary, the *woman* of faith. We should be planning our annual convention programs further in advance with a view toward reaching greater depth in a series on one basic topic. After 28 years of these meetings, comprehension in mariological matters must start taking priority over extending ourselves too far.

My concluding remark would be the hope that our Society will always be ready to render whatever service we can in assisting any mission of the Church where the mariological dimension is to be clarified. This requires collaboration not only within our own organization but with others such as the joint committee of the Catholic Learned Societies created a couple of years ago precisely to bring together the bishops and scholars into a greater cooperative effort in the teaching mission of the Church. I trust that any ideas we may have *as a Society* on the renewal of catechetics in our time could be sent to Cardinal Carberry who will be attending the next Synod. May this be but the beginning of a new era in our service to the Church *as a Society*.